

Empowering the Virgin Rethinking the Agency of the Feminine Characters in James Joyce's Works

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Abstract In the literary convention of 'Blessed Virgin', female purity and spirituality are most often emphasized, as represented by the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages and by the Angel in the House in the more secular nineteenth century. The patriarchal idealization of womanhood has deprived it of bodily desires and free will; the Blessed-Virgin women are praised and worshipped at the cost of individuality and sexuality. The Victorian conception of the 'Angel in the House' was the manifestation of the dominant patriarchal ideology of the nineteenth century, and was reflected in the works of a great number of male writers. As the heir apparent to the Victorian cultural heritage and the progeny of the Victorian literary forefathers, is James Joyce capable of transcending his own time? Or does Joyce actually expose the workings of ideology and desire in order to subvert such conventions, as some critics have argued? This article aims to rethink the issue of the centuries-old representation of the Blessed-Virgin and to reread James Joyce's representation of Blessed-Virgin women in his works. The central argument of this paper is to demonstrate the Blessed-Virgin women's individuality as thinking and desiring subjects, and their agency to influence the male consciousness and to challenge the patriarchal dominance, as exemplified by the feminine characters Gretta ("The Dead"), the Bird-Girl (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), and Gerty (*Ulysses*), in Joyce's works.

Keywords James Joyce. Representation of Women. Blessed-virgin Women. "The Dead". Ulysses. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

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Peer review

Submitted 2022-08-23
Accepted 2023-01-29
Published 2023-04-13

Open access

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Citation Kao, P.W.C. (2023). "Empowering the Virgin: Rethinking the Agency of the Feminine Characters in James Joyce's Works". *English Literature*, 9(1), 81-102.

No mystery of well-woven speech,
 No simplest phrase of tenderest fall,
 No liken'd excellence can reach
 Her, the most excellent of all,
 The best half of creation's best,
 Its heart to feel; its eye to see,
 The crown and complex of the rest,
 Its aim and its epitome.
 Nay, might I utter my conceit
 (Coventry Patmore, *Angel in the House*)

1 The Prelude

The literary convention of the 'Blessed Virgin' is invariably focused on female purity and spirituality, as represented by the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages and by the 'Angel in the House' in the more secular nineteenth century (Gilbert, Gubar 2000, 20). This patriarchal idealization has deprived womanhood of its bodily desires and free will; the Blessed-Virgin women are praised and worshipped at the expense of agency and sexuality. The Victorian conception of the 'Angel in the House' was a manifestation of the dominant patriarchal ideology of the nineteenth century, and is reflected in the works of a great number of male writers. Dickens's Lucie in *A Tale of Two Cities* – stunningly beautiful, faithful, and graceful – is the pure maiden in distress awaiting to be rescued by the self-sacrificing Sidney Carton. Thackeray's Amelia Sedly in *Vanity Fair*, the innocent prototype of the 'Angel in the House', stands out in stark relief against the scheming, sharp-witted Becky Sharp. Even Hardy's unconventional eponymous heroine Tess, who has the guts to rebel against tradition and to take revenge, remains a 'Pure Woman' doomed to be stifled by patriarchal law. As heir apparent to the Victorian cultural heritage and the progeny of the Victorian literary forefathers, is Joyce capable of transcending the confines of his own time? Or is Joyce able to 'subvert conventions' through the lens of feminism? (Lawrence 1990, 242).

The central argument of this essay is to demonstrate the Blessed-Virgin women's individuality as a thinking and desiring subject as well as their agency to influence male consciousness and challenge patriarchal dominance, as exemplified by the female characters Gretta ("The Dead"), the Bird-Girl (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), and Gerty (*Ulysses*) in Joyce's works. On the other hand, I consider the Blessed-Virgin women's harmonious yet dignified relation with men, which carries the potential dynamic to change the hierarchical sexual power relations and is foreseen in Joyce's vision of women. The critical commentaries about Joyce's attitudes towards gender culture and gender conventions revolve around two opposite poles. One group of feminists, represented by Sandra Gilbert and Su-

san Gubar, thinks that Joyce's representation of female characters is misogynistic. They contend that women in Joyce's works are confined to "body" and excluded from the production of "culture" (Gilbert, Gubar 1985, 518). They have expressed their distrust of Hélène Cixous's optimistic attitude about Molly Bloom, who carries "Ulysses off beyond any book and toward the new writing" (1976, 884). They lament that women in Joyce are "sentenced" to a purely material existence. Assuming a radical posture, Gilbert and Gubar call for the construction of a feminist poetics, following the Woolfian dictum: "we must 'kill' the 'angel in the house'" (Gilbert, Gubar 2000, 16-20).¹ Katherine Mullin points out the complicity of British imperialist and Irish nationalist propaganda, which have reduced the status of Irish women to the 'Angel in the House'. Joyce's text only reflects the 'paralysis' and the lifelessness of Blessed-Virgin women, compromised by the double bind of Irish nationalism and British patriarchy. At the opposite pole, some critics maintain that Joyce's subversion of social and literary conventions is an act of alliance with feminism. For example, Suzette Henke affirms Molly's power of resistance and finds in her monologue "a subversive feminine discourse that defies logocentric boundaries" (Henke 2000, 145). Ross C. Murffin observes that Joyce is an unorthodox male writer who "simultaneously resisted and revised those cultural types that simplistically (over)determine gender and gender difference" (143). Karen Lawrence mentioned Joyce's attempt to explain the institutionalization of cultural myths based on binary concepts. She affirms that Joyce, in his efforts to unmask binary opposition, deserves to be called the "precursor of deconstruction" (241-2).

James Joyce has long been enshrined in the modernist canon as a white male prose writer (Scott 1990, 196). The process of canon formation inevitably excluded the texts of female writers and suppressed the gender issues in the canonized texts. To debunk the myth of male creativity and female submission, I start from a rereading of the canonized male writer James Joyce to make a departure from the traditional and conservative critical stance. I adopt the alternative reading strategy to rethink the issue of femininity and agency, aiming

¹ Virginia Woolf in "Professions for Women" criticizes the Victorian ideology of the 'Angel in the House', which dictates passivity, purity, and sanctity of womanhood. To become a woman writer at her times, Woolf attempts to 'kill' this ideology: "I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily [...] Above all, [...] she was pure[...] Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Woolf 1980, 1987-8).

to unearth the empowering force of the feminine characters, whose voices are buried in Joyce's works.

2 The Joycean Style: Make it New

Ezra Pound's modernist dictum to 'make it new' can be applied not only to experimental narrative techniques, but also to the progressive treatment of thematic conception (Scott 1984, 16-7). In addition to briefly investigating Joyce's feminine mannerism in his writings, starting from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I make a close analysis of the Blessed-Virgin and feminine characters bound within the textual house of Joyce's writings. In so doing, I attempt to tease out the Poundian new elements in Joyce's works in terms of the feminine writing style and thematic reevaluation.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf posits the possibility of "a common sentence ready for [a woman's use]" to be distinguished from the "man's sentence" employed by male writers (2015, 56). Succeeding Woolf's pioneering work to search for a 'feminine' writing style suited for the female writers, later-day French feminists such as Hélène Cixous propose the concept of '*écriture féminine*'. This kind of "utopian linguistic structure" calls our attention not only to the "grammatical" dimension of women's language use, but also the condition of "woman's legal sentence" (Gilbert, Gubar 1988 230,231).

Joyce's stylistic transformation from the realism of *The Dubliners* (1914) to the stream-of-consciousness of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and finally to the highly experimental style of *Ulysses* (1922) represents his linguistic bisexuality. It shows his attempt to progress from the masculinist realism to the feminine stream-of-consciousness, and his hankering to delve into the consciousness of his female characters. The linguistic and stylistic revolution "promises not just female *jouissance* but feminist *puissance*" (Gilbert, Gubar 1988, 271). If "a man's sentence" is designed "swift but not slovenly, expressive but not precious", then "a woman's sentence" is written with "terseness" and with "short-windedness" (Woolf 1929, 1968). In order to "[write] like a woman", she first "[breaks] the sentence" afterwards "she has broken the sequence" (1974, 1969). In other words, she ventures to break "the expected order" (1974). Woolf contends that for a great writer, the "great mind is androgynous", just as the great sentence combines the traits of both sexes, so that it must be "woman-manly or man-womanly" in its style and formation (1981). Based on Woolf's iconoclastic attitude toward the writing style of a woman writer, or a great writer, we might judge Joyce's stream-of-consciousness technique in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and his broken and irregular sentences in *Ulysses* as the integral creation of an 'androgynous' mind.

Although Cixous proposes that “a feminine practice of writing” is something like “an impossibility that will remain”, she maintains that it “doesn’t mean that it [the *écriture féminine*] doesn’t exist” (Cixous 1976, 883). She further defines that the *écriture féminine* is a form of writing that is “bisexual, hence neuter, which again does away with differentiation” (883). Joyce is an example of such a “bisexual” writer, *not* in the sense that he practices bisexuality, but because he is “capable of loving love and hence capable of loving others and of wanting them, of imagining the woman who would hold out against oppression and constitute herself as a superb, equal, hence ‘impossible’ subject” (879). Thus we see in Joyce’s works feminine characters whom the male writer loves, and whose “appearance would necessarily bring on, if not revolution [...] at least harrowing explosions” (879). In creating such feminine characters, Joyce endows them with, and explores in them, the “bodily desires” that “[have] been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger” (880). In other words, Joyce rescues those feminine characters from the imprisonment of centuries-old institutions and releases them to enjoy their body. “Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies” (885).

Affirmed as the “indispensable countersign” to the male-centered world of Dublin, Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* is mostly given the credit for representing the Joycean style of the “*écriture féminine*” (Scott 1984, 4; Joyce 1975, 60). Molly’s interior monologue is highly experimental and sexually candid, indicating an intelligent and awakened female consciousness. Bonnie Kime Scott identified in her the traits of several female figures, such as Penelope, Calypso and Nausicaä from Homer; the Blessed Virgin Mary; and *Gea Tellus*, the earth mother (Scott 1984, 156). The numerous and protean nature of Molly signifies the birth of a complex and lifelike female character in Joyce’s masterpiece, a departure from the one-dimensional whorish or saintly woman in the works of other nineteenth-century male writers. Richard Ellmann observes that Joyce’s final line has transformed Goethe’s “I am the spirit that always denies” into “I am the flesh that always affirms” (quoted in Scott 1984, 158; see Joyce 1975, 285). The female is equated to the desiring spouse and the approving mother, as opposed to the intellectual father and the negative husband.

Joseph Valente appropriates the Deleuzian concept of “becoming woman” to describe Molly’s most impossibly long monologue, which is “the last great stylistic disfiguration of the novel” (quoted in Maud Ellmann 2014, 98; Valente 1995, 191). The meaning of this ungraspable and ever-changing “becoming woman” is connotative rather than denotative, which breaks down the boundary between the masculine and the feminine, and further erupts into “a thousand tiny sexes”

(quoted in Maud Ellmann 2014, 98; Deleuze, Guattari 2004, 303-7). Moreover, Molly even consciously attempts to reach a "becoming-man": "God I wouldn't mind being a man and get up on a lovely woman" (Joyce 2008, 720).

In similar fashion, Michael Jaeggli argues that Joyce employs the literary device of parody to debunk the essentialist myth that "Jewish and gentile women are bereft of a soul and intelligible self" (Jaeggli 2022, 273). Joyce's Molly is a Jewish woman full of potentialities and contradictions, far away from the nineteenth-century stereotypical conception on the subordinate and submissive Jewish type. Grounded on the technique of parody, *Ulysses* was written to counter against the naturalizing and essentializing discourse on race, sex and gender. Molly serves as the capital symbol of the complexity, ambiguity and autonomy of woman.

Although Molly is mostly used as the example of Joyce's engagement with and representation of femininity, in this article I turn to Gretta, the Bird-Girl, and Gerty as Molly's likeminded feminine sisters capable of thinking and desiring agency, very much like Molly herself.

Although Joyce was arguably influenced by several "intellectual women" as suggested by some critics, his great emotional attachment to his wife Nora Barnacle cannot be overlooked (Scott 1990, 196-7). Nora was not an intellectual supporter of Joyce's writing career; nevertheless, her lower-class background and homely nature bears resemblance to the unharmed image of the Blessed-Virgin characters in Joyce's works. In a letter written to Nora in 1904, Joyce complained about the bond and shackles of traditional Catholic religion and family structure, calling himself a "vagabond" (Joyce 1975, 207). In that letter Joyce seeks the support and understanding of Nora, and seems to look for Nora's recognition and to be solaced by her tender attachment. "Believe me, my dear Nora, I honour you very much but I want more than your caresses. You have left me again in an anguish for doubt" (208). Like the male characters – Gabriel Conroy, Stephen Dedalus, and Leopold Bloom – in his own writings, he is (un)consciously attached to and influenced by the unaffectionate and innocent Nora.

In addition to Nora, Joyce also got his inspiration for modelling the feminine figure of Gerty McDowell from another prominent woman in his life, Marthe Fleischmann (Richard Ellmann 449). In Marthe, the images of Gerty and the Bird-Girl are conflated, which demonstrate how Joyce delighted in and was inspired by their clandestine relationship outside his marital bond with Nora. Joyce kept up a correspondence with Marthe and their association meant a lot to Joyce from December 1918 to March 1919 (450). With lambent wit, Joyce once sent her a postcard "with greetings to Nausicaa from Odysseus" (452). Like the encounter between Bloom and Gerty, Joyce and Marthe's relationship remained consummated on a spiritual and a literary level.

3 **Gretta: the Passion and Energy of the Mothering Virgin**

In "The Dead" the protagonist's wife, Gretta Conroy, is portrayed in the image of the Blessed Virgin, despite the fact that she is a wife and a mother. In Joyce's vocabulary, "virginity" is defined by physical as well as spiritual purity (Eggers 1988, 25). From Joyce's perspective, "the soul like the body may have a virginity" (25). In addition, according to Catholic theology, the dominant religious practice in Ireland, the advocate of the Blessed Virgin is the Holy Mother. The image of Gretta standing on the stairs, listening to music, and captured by Gabriel in the "Distant Music", is like a vivid portrait of the Virgin Mary:

There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. Distant Music he would call the picture if he were a painter. (Joyce 2000, 180-1)

The static eternity and serene beauty of Gretta's image make her the embodiment of the Virgin Mary.

Set in the image of the Virgin Mary, Gretta is portrayed as an independent and capable woman in contrast to the helpless and fragile stereotype of the "Angel in the House". In Gretta's vivacious greeting and warm chatting with the Misses Morkans, she shows both her adept social skills and her genuine concern for her husband's people; therefore, she occupies a lofty and elevated status in his eyes. In Gretta's teasing of Gabriel for his taste for Continental exports – the galoshes – she is conducting a verbal fencing match, which displays her brilliant wit and strong vitality. In Gabriel's memory, she is still "country cute", as once objected by his mother, who "had nursed her during all her last long illness in their house at Monkstown" (Joyce 2000, 160). The lower-born Gretta shows her strong and comforting power as the moral supporter of the familial well-being, as the capable and caring (virginal) mother figure. Also, it is this "country [cut-]ie" from Galway who truly "hears", or "appreciates" the music of Mr. D'Arcy and the native culture of the Mother Earth of Ireland (Chambers 1988, 111). As the capable mother figure of the Conroys as well as the spiritual supporter of the family, Gretta achieves this without sacrificing her subjectivity and her selfhood as happened to traditional, submissive housewives.

Gretta's individuality is illustrated and consolidated through her reminiscences of Michael Furey. Her lifelike memories of her girl-

hood demonstrate her status as an independent woman with an individual history. Gretta's personal history makes her a complete and mature woman. In Gretta's wistful reminiscence of her old love story, she reveals herself as a woman with desire and passion. Gretta's story with Michael Furey retrieves her past, fulfills her present, and enlightens her future.

Not only does Gretta prove herself a strong and independent woman, she also asserts agency against patriarchal ideology in her capability to influence Gabriel, and consequently change the hierarchical power relations. In Vincent Cheng's employment of a postcolonial approach to address the gender issues in "The Dead", he adopts an alternative reading strategy to tackle the "conjoined dynamics of empire and sexual colonization" in the text (Cheng 1995, 134). According to Cheng, the protagonist Gabriel Conroy is a "well-meaning patriarch" who embodies the combination of "a potentially oppressive patriarch" and "the ruling masters of the English colonial empire" (135). Therefore, in Gabriel's interaction with the female characters in the text, especially with his wife Gretta and the servant girl Lily, he displays a patronizing or even condescending attitude, treating women as infantile creatures just as the British Empire treats the colonies as "incorrigible children" (135).

In the picturesque "Distant Music" scene, Gabriel gazes up at his wife and imagines her as "a symbol of something", an attitude that reveals how he treats, "sees", "appreciates" his wife as an aesthetic object, an "objet d'art" to be possessed rather than a subjective individual to be respected. When aroused and influenced by Gretta in their walk back home, Gabriel in his fantasy of "courtly love" wants to be a knight in defense of a maiden in distress: "She seemed to him so frail that he longed to defend her against something and then to be alone with her" (Joyce 2000, 183). As a gallant knight, Gabriel hankers to hold Gretta as his possession and his love trophy: "He had felt proud and happy then, happy that *she was his*, proud of her grace and wifely carriage" (185; emphasis added). In Gabriel's bewilderment at his wife's emotional combustion, he wants to be the master of Gretta's emotion; he wants to take the upper hand in their relationship. Also, as a master figure with both patriarchal and colonial authority, Gabriel inevitably embraces the Continental values of modernity and progress, such as wearing "galoshes" or having tours to "France and Belgium or perhaps Germany".

Confronted with Gabriel's imposing stature as a "well-meaning patriarch", Gretta is nevertheless able to transform the power relation, and destabilize patriarchal authority. In a word, she is able to assert her agency. At the beginning of the story, when speaking of the galoshes that Gabriel forced her to wear, she teases him while making her resistance: "Galoshes!...That's the latest. Whenever it's wet underfoot I must put on my galoshes. Tonight even he wanted me to put

them on, but I wouldn't. The next thing he'll buy me will be a diving suit" (Joyce 2000, 154). Though mere banter, it makes "Gabriel [laugh] nervously" (155). When Gabriel is taunted and challenged by Miss Ivors's iron nationalist stance, Gretta reassures him in a *motherly* way while aligning herself with "her people" of the west of Ireland. The most dramatic clash comes from Gretta's memory of her old love with Michael Furey, which challenges the self-centeredness of Gabriel's patriarchal authority. Gabriel's insecurity over Gretta's independence and his jealousy of her personal history shows that his patriarchal dominance is destabilized. Gretta's heart and emotion were occupied by another man; her desire is directed toward another man. Gretta says retrospectively: "I am thinking about a person long ago who used to sing that song". This confession makes "the smile [pass] away from Gabriel's face" and "a dull anger began to gather again at the back of his mind" (188). Indeed, Gabriel is belittled and overshadowed by Gretta's forgiving love and undying memories, and he feels ashamed of himself in the face of the selfless and pure love between Gretta and Michael Furey:

—What was he? asked Gabriel, still ironically.

—He was in the gasworks, she said.

Gabriel felt *humiliated* by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks. While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A *shameful* consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a *ludicrous* figure, acting as penny-boy for his aunts, a *nervous* well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own *clownish* lusts, the *pitiable fatuous* fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror. Instinctively he turned his back more to the light lest she might see the *shame* that burn upon his forehead. (189; emphases added)

Gabriel is "humiliated", "tamed", even "silenced" by Gretta's nobler thoughts and feelings. She is generous, forgiving, compassionate, and caring; while he is jealous, mean, and self-centered: "He tried to keep up his tone of cold interrogation but his voice when he spoke was humble and indifferent" (189). Gretta's kind reply, "I think he died for me", has produced a "vague terror" in Gabriel "as if, at the hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world" (190). Gabriel feels he is defeated by Gretta's past, by her old memory, by her private world, even by her preference of the "ghost" of Michael.

At the end of the story, the amiable and peaceful attitude towards Michael and Gabriel displayed by Gretta is impressive and moving.

The forgiving and magnanimous nature of Gretta has deeply impacted Gabriel's mentality and engendered the epiphany of the snow scene in Gabriel's vision. Cheng thinks that Gabriel's final epiphany represents "an act of emotional expansiveness, self-understanding, and generosity" (1995, 146). In Gabriel's epiphany, the "snow was general all over Ireland" (Joyce 2000, 192), which indicates a universal embracing of all differences and a breaking-down of the hierarchy between high and low. "Gabriel's final vision of the falling snow [...] attempts to break down the barriers of difference constructed by the patriarchal ego he is so deeply implicated in, into at least a recognition of generosity and sameness" (Cheng 1995, 146-7). At last, the hierarchy of sexual power relations is loosening and crumbling down, ending up in a transcendence of zones, of differences, and a boundary-crossing of subject and object, male and female. Thanks to Gretta's influence and agency, Gabriel has become more generous, more receptive to the influence of the dead, the past, and lower-class people. Finally, the patriarchal egoist is changed and influenced by the passion and energy of his Blessed-Virgin wife.

4 The Bird-Girl: the Aesthetic Muse as an Influential Patroness

The wading Bird-Girl whom Stephen encounters in the stream is described in an ethereal, unearthly, and impressionistic manner. Many of her characteristics are associated with the Blessed Virgin. Her "slateblue skirts" is the first symbol of her virginity, for "blue" is the color of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Gifford 1982, 222). And she is set in the image of an "angel of mortal youth and beauty" (Joyce 1916, 172), which is reminiscent of Dante's description of the "ideal spiritual beauty of Beatrice" (Gifford 1982, 222). In Stephen's romantic vision, the Bird-Girl is transmuted into the Pre-Raphaelite rose, which is also an echo of the "multifoliate rose of light" befalling on Dante in the final cantos of *Paradiso* (222). The metaphorical rose represents both the Bird-Girl's physical beauty and her spiritual fragrance, which could be found in the mysterious grace of the Virgin Mary:

A world, a glimmer, or a flower? Glimmering and trembling, trembling and unfolding, a breaking light, an opening flower, it spread in endless succession to itself, breaking in full crimson and unfolding and fading to pales rose, leaf by leaf and wave of light by wave of light, flooding all the heavens with its soft flushes, every flush deeper than other. (Joyce 1916, 172)

In Stephen's epiphany, the Bird-Girl becomes an aesthetic muse, who is an inspiration of his artistic vocation. In Suzette Henke's words,

"Stephen's artistic vision seems to be confirmed by an encounter with a woman who evokes a luminous vision of earthly beauty" (Henke 1988, 67). Thereafter, Stephen has determined to commit himself to the pagan priesthood of Father Daedalus, "a symbol of the artist figure" who forged his art into "a new soaring impalpable imperishable being" (Joyce 1916, 169). For the sake of artistic freedom and creative divineness, he has renounced the "grave and ordered and passionless life" of the Jesuit community (160). This milestone decision is inspired as well as heralded by the Bird-Girl, whom Stephen glorifies as an angelic messenger, "an envoy from the fair courts of life" (172). If the field of art is like the heaven of genesis, it is the Bird-Girl who becomes Stephens' "Beatrice" in the realm of the artistic empyrean to "[usher] him into the circle of heavenly experience" (Henke 1988, 69).

Not only does the Bird-Girl serve as the aesthetic muse of the sensitive Stephen, but she also assumes the role of an influential patroness to protect the young Stephen from carnal temptation and the trivialities of mundane life. The delineation of the Bird-Girl is interspersed with avian language and bird images, which are the symbol of spiritual as well as intellectual freedom, of wild soaring creativity, and of flight from the bond and stranglehold of the diurnal life:

A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic has changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful *seabird*. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a *crane's* and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like *featherings* of soft white down. Her slateblue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and *dovetailed* behind her. Her bosom was a *bird's* soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some *dark-plumaged* dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face. (Joyce 1916, 171; emphases added)

Joyce's delineation of the bodily beauty and delicateness of the Bird-Girl befits the dictate of Cixous to embrace women's bodies: "We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game" (Cixous 1976, 885). Rather than timorously shunning away from her own naked body and the worshipping gaze of Stephen, the Bird-Girl boldly displays her own body and accepts the male gaze without any coyness. With the image of flight and freedom, the Bird-Girl is able to inspire the young Stephen in the art of "flying" and "exile" in his final quest for aesthetic freedom. As Cixous puts it, "[f]lying is woman's gesture - flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its

numerous techniques" (887). The young Stephen is reborn and reanimated by his Muse, so that he could wield the force of "silence, exile, and cunning" to fly away from the stranglehold of religion and Ireland (Joyce 1916, 247).

She serves as the embodiment of serene beauty, quiet and peaceful intercourse, at least artistic and spiritual if not physical. With her tender and unabashed acceptance of Stephen's gaze and her innocent gait, she has transcended both carnal desire and sexual frigidity. In the face of Bird-Girl's transcendent beauty and transparent air, Stephen cries "in an outburst of profane joy" (Joyce 1916, 171). In the next scene, Stephen is imbued with vital life and ecstatic energy. He relives, renewed and reborn by the fairylike conjuring of the Bird-Girl:

His cheeks were aflame; his body was aglow, his limbs were trembling. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him [...] Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! (172)

At the end of his encounter with the Bird-Girl, Stephen's soul is regenerated and recreated; he is a newborn blessed with the Bird-Girl's spiritual beatitude (172). A new heaven and a new earth are created for Stephen by the Aesthetic Muse, who has opened the gate of a brand-new journey of life before him. In his plunge into the light sleep at the end of the episode, Stephen has undergone a spiritual journey as well as a dream vision, which is the indication of his spiritual rebirth and his spiritual reawakening: "Evening had fallen when he woke and the sand and arid grasses of his bed glowed no longer. He rose slowly and, recalling the rapture of his sleep, sighed at its joy" (173). Like the knight enamored with the femme fatale in Keats's poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", Stephen is totally won and totally conquered by the Bird-Girl. In contrast to Henke's argument that the Bird-Girl is objectified by the misogynist Stephen, who "must distance and 'depersonalize' the tempting figure by making her into a species of aesthetic prey", Eric Bulson argues for the positive and dynamic force invested in the figure of the Bird-Girl (Henke 1988, 68; Bulson 2008). The Blessed-Virgin figure is different from those stereotypes of virtuous or degenerate women, for the Bird-Girl is a composite of the sensual and the spiritual, the mortal and the eternal, and the human and the divine. The Bird-Girl becomes a "life-giving force" for the young Stephen once lost and bewildered by mundane life (57). With Stephen's perspective about women and about life changed, I suggest the transformation of the binary structure of

Stephen's worldview is thereby made possible. The spirit/body, male/female divide once held firm by Stephen "the misogynist" is beginning to collapse.

The Bird-Girl also contributes to the crystallization of Stephen's aesthetic theory. If the religious fervor of the Jesuit brothers and the carnal love of the prostitute are subsumed under the "kinetic emotion", defined as "arts [...] pornographical or didactic [...] therefore improper arts", the serenity and quietness of the Bird-Girl's aura can be seen as the origin of Stephen's theory of aesthetic stasis, which is "an ideal pity or an ideal terror, a stasis called forth, prolonged and at last dissolved by what [he] call[s] the rhythm of beauty" (Joyce 1916, 205-6). In addition, in his appropriation of Aquinas's aesthetic theory, "*ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur, integritas, consonantia, claritas*", Stephen translated it into "Three things are needed for beauty, wholeness, harmony, and radiance" (212; emphases original). The scene of his encounter with the Bird-Girl is a vivid portrait of the quintessence of beauty: wholeness, harmony, and radiance. While Stephen calls his aesthetic theory "applied Aquinas", I argue that his Aesthetic Muse deserves the credit for the theory's fountainhead.

5 Gerty: the Quiet Dignity of the Disabled Maiden

In the "Nausicaa" chapter of *Ulysses*, the heroine Gerty is set in the image of "Angel in the House". The tone of the chapter and many of Gerty's characteristics are associated with the Virgin Mary. The symbol of the episode is the Virgin and one of its dominant colors is blue; the setting is Abbey Howth, a church "dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, and hence styled St. Mary's" (quoted in Gilbert 1958, 287).² The whiteness symbolic of Gerty's spiritual purity and her immaculate virginity is emphasized in the representation of her figure, which is "slight" and "graceful" and shining with "ivorylike purity" (Joyce 2008, 333). Fritz Senn maintains that Gerty's proximity to the Virgin Mary is reflected in the background of the whole narrative, which is blended with the Litany of the Blessed Virgin and recited in the nearby Star of the Sea church (293-5). The healing power of Gerty is an echo of the Virgin Mary's cure of illness, which is spiritual as well as physical: "Refuge of sinners. Comfortress of the afflicted" (Joyce 2008, 342).

In Tony Jackson's and Vicki Mahaffey's readings of "Nausicaa," Gerty, who is viewed as a product of patriarchal discourse, is deprived of her subjectivity and independence. According to Jackson, "Nausicaa" is the "female counterpart of 'Cyclops,'" in which "the

² See *Guide to Ireland* (Black 1906).

discourses of femininity inscribe and are inscribed by a narcissistic self-mythology of dependence" (Jackson 1991, 73). Frozen in the image of the Virgin Mary, which is dictated and defined by the Church Fathers, Gerty is entrapped in the imaginary misrecognition of the male gaze: "The image of Mary [...] is a showing of feminine subjectivity by the Gaze as 'looked' by the patriarchal Church" (76). Therefore, Gerty is reduced to an object to be contemplated by the male gaze: "In the realm of religion the male Gaze shows woman as selfless and bodiless, gendered but sexless" (76). Moreover, Mahaffey argues that the popular discourse also contributes to the objectification of women in general and Gerty in particular, who tends to see herself in the image of "a desirable commodity on the marriage market" (1998, 159). Mahaffey points out the dictates of patriarchal culture for women: one is "an erasure or concealment of the body and of sexual power", while the other is being "an inspirational icon [as] the prize in a patriarchal contest" (158). In light of Jackson's and Mahaffey's claims, Gerty is dispossessed of her subjectivity and reduced to a commodity on the marriage market, and an object of male desire; in fact, Bloom, by masturbating at the sight of the girl, exploits her. In short, based on the cynical reading of "Nausicaa", Bloom has compensated his traumatic loss by the substitute pleasure with Gerty.

By contrast, I want to spotlight Gerty's strength as well as her resilience despite the fact of her lameness and her physical impairment. While Mahaffey contends that Gerty is "defenseless" in the face of "natural desire" (1990, 162), Karen Lawrence affirms the "possibility of female desire" opened up by Joyce in "Nausicaa" (252). In fact, Gerty is able to love and to desire. She is true to herself and true to her nature in her hankering to meet her true love in the image of a man with firm will and strong build:

No prince charming is her beau ideal to lay a rare and wondrous love at her feet but rather a manly man with a strong quiet face who had not found his ideal, perhaps his hair slightly flecked with grey, and who would understand, take her in his sheltering arms, strain her to him in all the strength of his deep passionate nature and comfort her with a long long kiss. It would be like heaven. For such a one she *yearns* this balmy summer eve. *With all the heart of her she longs to be his only*, his affianced bride for riches for poor, in sickness in health, till death us two part, from this to this day forward. (Joyce 2008, 336; emphases added)

Gerty daydreams is to become a desiring subject instead of a desired object. In her awareness of Bloom's desiring gaze and her acquiescence, or acceptance, of Bloom in the name of Love, we can see the genuine and unaffected nature of Gerty, who is true to herself and true to her heart. She is *not* a self-righteous prude putting on airs:

"She would follow her dream of love, the dictates of her heart had told her he was her all in all, the only man in all the world for her for *love was the master guide*. Nothing else mattered. Come what might *she would be wild, untrammelled, free*" (348; emphases added).

Brian Cosgrove contends that, in *Ulysses*, Joyce employs a technique of irony and parody, exposing the "Nausicaa" section under "Joyce's possible misogyny" and "cruelly ironic perspective" (Cosgrove 2007, 104). Cosgrove points out the ironic treatment of Gerty by portraying her as a pure virgin who indulges in "sexual fantasy" (119). Bearing in mind (Joyce's) ironic and misogynistic perspective, this male critic deems Gerty as "dishonest and hypocritical" (121). However, after a turn and twist to Gerty's "lameness", Cosgrove admits that Gerty has some sort of dignity and autonomy. Trapped in such a critical double-bind, Cosgrove attempts to reconcile the contradiction by resorting to the "dual perspective" and "textual indeterminacy" of the work as a whole (129; 131). I suggest this "post-structuralist" reading strategy is a questionable critical perspective, leading the reader to wonder which position to take and which line of thought to follow.

By contrast, in a similar vein to my central argument, Dominika Bednarska undertakes a disability reading of the "Nausicaa" section that empowers Gerty McDowell. Bednarska argues for Gerty's power to transform "disability" into "ability", and her formation of an "alternative erotic sensibility" to experience pleasure and construct her subjectivity (Bednarska 2011, 73). Bednarska's observation corroborates my line of thought when I argue for Gerty's particular "agency" to love and to desire, despite her physical impairment. Suzette Henke argues that Joyce's treatment of Gerty McDowell is grounded on the form of parody, that Joyce is satirizing her role as a "seductive nymph" on the one hand, and lamenting her status as an "athletic victim of social and religious enculturation" (Henke 1982, 15). Although Henke magnifies the pathos of Gerty's disabled situation, she "[admires] the bravado of her self-assertion in the competitive sexual market of 1904" (134). Notwithstanding her being conditioned by the "feminine passivity", as suggested by Henke, I argue that Gerty's femininity and disability are transformed into a redeeming power to soothe and uplift Leopold Bloom, since both of them have experienced a remorselessly pleasurable encounter. Henke also admits that Gerty "proves that she can arouse, titillate, and satisfy masculine desire, and the incident constitutes an erotic victory" (147).

Stuart Gilbert also affirms that Gerty can write her own love story and her own history; Gerty is a writing as well as a desiring subject (1958, 290). Richard Ellmann also mentions Gerty's taste for poetry and affirms her status as a thinking subject, the authoress of the first half of the episode. The thinking Gerty inspires Joyce "to entrust half of one episode to his Nausicaa's authorship" (Ellmann

2014, 105).³ Gerty's desire for love makes her immersed in the world of fashion magazines and sentimental pages, on which Mahaffey comments in a somewhat cynical and pessimistic way: "The attitude that *Ulysses* takes toward female beauty is exuberantly unconventional. Joyce depicts beauty as sleight-of-hand, a trick of costume, an accident of lighting, a by-product of style, designed to make women feel less ordinary and to provoke sexual desire in men" (163). By contrast, I would argue that Gerty's agency and individuality are consolidated by her self-empowerment through the process of making herself physically attractive and lovable.⁴ In defense of Gerty's self-empowerment through fashion discourses, Fritz Senn also contends that Gerty "presents herself to her best advantage for one short span, at the proper distance, with just the right degree of illumination to increase her glamour (which is what the advice she gets from the fashion page amounts to)" (Senn 1977, 281). In terms of Gerty's self-empowerment, I would suggest that Gerty's subjectivity is consolidated and fashioned by the bourgeois discourses of fashion (Madame Vera Verity of the "Woman Beautiful page of the Princess novelette") and by the sentimental romance (*The Lamplighter*). Gerty's wonderland of fashion and romance actually reflects the subject-formation of the "self-fashioning" bourgeois women. Mahaffey's negative commentaries on women's cult of beauty for its "implied misogyny" and its effects of distortion is unsympathetic and unsympathetic towards Gerty's physical disability (163). Gerty's resilience and strength should be respected given her physical impairment, not examined and fault picked.

Furthermore, Gerty is invested with dynamic force to change the status quo of the gender power relations. Gerty is the spiritual refuge for Bloom and has the capability to influence male consciousness. Gerty's world is one of forgiving, understanding, and unpossessive love, which she "fantasized" as the keynote of her relationship with Bloom. The healing power of Gerty as a Blessed-Virgin figure is undeniable:

It was he who mattered and there was joy on her face because she wanted him because she felt instinctively that he was like no-one

³ Richard Ellmann suggests that Joyce's use of the narrative technique through Gerty's consciousness is designed to parody Samuel Butler's book, *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, which contends that it is Nausicaa, instead of Homer, who wrote the book *The Odyssey*. Ellmann is not explicitly in favour of this line of argument, but nonetheless maintains the validity of Gerty's voice and her authorship.

⁴ Richard Ellmann also points out Gerty's self-empowerment and self-buoyancy. Nevertheless, Ellmann suggests that Gerty's momentum is based on her unfledged "youth" instead of her self-awareness: "Gerty sees things as they might be, she is full of dreams, she is convinced of her own uniqueness [...] and she regards Bloom, immediate object of her affections, as also unique, different from all other men. A sense of herself as paramount in the universe is inextricably connected with her youth". (Ellmann 2009, 106)

else. The very heart of the girlwoman went out to him, her dream-husband, because she knew on the instant it was him. If he had suffered, more sinned against than sinning, or even, even, if he had been himself a sinner, a wicked man, she cared not. Even if he was a protestant or methodist she could convert him easily if he truly loved her. There were wounds that wanted healing with heartbalm [...] and she just yearned to know all, to forgive all if she could make him fall in love with her, make him forget the memory of the past. (Joyce 2008, 342)

By virtue of Gerty's innocent and understanding I/eyes, Bloom is redeemed and elevated:

Leopold Bloom [...] stands silent, with bowed head before those young guileless eyes [...] A fair unsullied soul had called to him and, wretch that he was, how had he answered? An utter cad he had been. He of all men! But there was an infinite store of mercy in those eyes, for him too a word of pardon even though he had erred and sinned and wandered. (350)

Senn observes that during the possible communion between Gerty and Bloom, Bloom takes advantage of the "escape mechanism" (280). Bloom has embarked on a "tour of love", which is partly motivated by the unhappiness of domestic life (281). In a masterstroke, Senn interprets Bloom's abortive message "I...A.M. A" on the strand sand as a gesture of love confession, for which contains "the Latin root *ama-love*" (281). Actually, Bloom's encounter with Gerty is veiled by a love that he defines as "the opposite of hatred" (281). Their encounter is a healing and empowering episode: "Their soul met in a last lingering glance and the eyes that reached her heart, full of a strange shining, hung enraptured on her sweet flowerlike face. She half smiled at him wanly, a sweet forgiving smile, a smile that verged on tears, and then they parted" (Joyce 2008, 351). This is the communion of soul-mates, if not the physical consummation of true lovers.⁵ At the end of the episode, Bloom is grateful for the invigorating and empowering encounter with Gerty: "We'll never meet again. Goodbye dear. Thanks. Made me feel so young" (364). This last farewell once again shows the healing and soothing power of the Blessed-Virgin Gerty. The last ninefold "cuckoos", read through the rosy lens of a love en-

⁵ If we take into account the technique of "Nausicaa" chapter – tumescence and detumescence – and the symbolic meaning of the fireworks scene, they could serve as the episode of sexual climax. Richard Ellmann has suggested Joyce uses "Roman candle", one particular firework, to combine "Roman Catholic religiosity and pagan phallicism", which creates the poetic sense of sexual orgasm, an imaginary consummation that is "impregnated with Gerty's fertile imagination". (Ellmann 2009, 104)

counter, could be explained as “the number of completeness and eternity” in numerology (Gifford 1988, 404). The possibility of “completeness and eternity” engendered by Bloom’s encounter with Gerty is indicative of a sense of wholeness and fulfillment in Bloom’s heart that was once emptied out by Molly’s infidelity.

The resilience, the “quiet dignity” of the lame Gerty has provoked the soft spot in Bloom’s as well as the reader’s heart. The limping Blessed-Virgin in *Ulysses* has shown her strength and her vigor. Gerty is able to love and to desire, to “play” or to “self-fashion” the role of the sanctified Virgin Mary. She is able to offer spiritual comfort and moral uplift for Bloom. She can thereby change the status quo through influencing the male consciousness. The strength and resilience of Gerty stands in stark contrast with her physical disability – the courage of the Blessed-Virgin is remarkable and (self)-empowering.

6 A Coda

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have expressed their concern over the male author’s tendency to “silence” his characters by depriving them of their autonomy. In Gilbert and Gubar’s perspective, the male author’s patriarchal right of ownership over the female characters demonstrates his tendency to treat women as mere properties, locked or “imprisoned” in male texts: “[a]s a creation ‘penned’ by man,... woman has been ‘penned up’ or ‘penned in.’ As a sort of ‘sentence’ man has spoken, she has herself been ‘sentenced’” (Gilbert, Gubar 2000, 13). To rebel against the male author’s hegemony consigned by the patriarchal ideology, Gilbert and Gubar have proposed the feminist poetics, which radically enjoins the female writer to fight back, to “kill” the “Angel in the House”, which is the aesthetic ideal constructed by male authors. They have found that in patriarchal texts “every angelically selfless Snow White must be hunted, if not haunted, by a wickedly assertive Stepmother” (28). Their objective is to vindicate the role of the “Stepmother”, the Monster-Woman, as an active voice of female autonomy. Nevertheless, in their efforts to clear the name of “the madwoman in the attic” and to reassert the mysterious power of female characters, feminists like Gilbert and Gubar often ignore the potential force and agency of the Blessed-Virgin women, as if the “Angel in the House” was born to align with the patriarchal power. It seems their fellow “pure women” are doomed to be “killed”, or exiled by the female writer’s pen.

In *No Man’s Land*, Gilbert and Gubar introduce their book with a long chapter that chronicles the history of the “battle of the sexes” (1998, 4). They trace the “sexual struggle” through the records and works of Mid-Victorian writers, modernist writers, postmodern-

ist writers, to contemporary writers (4). The fierce struggle and the waxing and waning of men's power and superiority over women tell something about the awakening of feminist awareness and women's struggle for autonomy over long years. By contrast, instead of depicting the relation between men and women as a militant sexual battle, where combatants are intent on defeating one another, I would characterize their relation as an encounter, whether a beautiful one or a dreadful one. The nature of the encounter boils down to the "interpretations" by writers, critics, and readers based on their respective life experiences. In fact, Gilbert and Gubar admit that "both sides in the battle between the sexes are equally culpable", so that it is "virtually unimaginable" to identify a final winner in this literal and metaphorical antagonism (60-1). I would suggest that the interaction between men and women is an incessant cycle of dispute, resentment and reconciliation on both sides. As a twentieth-first century female reader of Joyce's works, I have tried to act as a go-between conducive to a fruitful and fulfilling encounter between the male and the female characters.

When the "Angel in the House" is repelled by her own mother and sister, it is the revolutionary male writer James Joyce who represents the Blessed-Virgin women and reinterprets the meaning of virginity. In Joyce's unconventional representation, Blessed-Virgin women are not the romanticized and essentialized mates of condescending patriarchs; instead, they have thinking and desire, and challenge the unequal sexual power relations. Their image is fraught with contradictions and ambivalence. Gretta incorporates the symbolic with the human, sexual purity with motherhood, passivity with activity. The Bird-Girl is an amalgam of pagan and Christian iconography, a wedding of the mortal and the angelic, and of the sensuous and the serene. Gerty's dual roles combine the "Angel in the House" with the "femme fatale". Joyce's art has redefined the status of virginity and breathed new life into their centuries-old image. Endowed with individuality and potential agency to change their relation with men, the Blessed-Virgin women are revived and regenerated in the pages before the reader's eyes. Joyce's vision of women is invested with beauty and potentiality, purity and capability; Joyce's art gives the prospect of a vibrant life, where the vital relation between men and women is made possible in the modern world.

The major theme of *Ulysses* is love, as it is in "The Dead" and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce is searching for "universal love" while writing about women and femininity. Joyce declares in *Ulysses*: "Love loves to love love" (319). In a similar vein Cixous proclaims that the "war of liberation" is waged under the banner of love: women "do not fetishize, they do not deny, they do not hate. They observe, they approach, they try to see the other women, the child, the lover - not to strengthen their narcissism, or verify the solidity or

weakness of the master, but to make love better, to invent" (892-3). In order to rewrite the history of sexual war, we need to re-create the canons in a new fashion based on "love" rather than "hatred" and to reach a new understanding of both men and women. Feminine women can love, can desire, can think; they not only dwell in the world of Joyce's works but also exist in the real-life world. To empower the virgin, to love the opposite sex, to respect one another - we are never far from a world of universal love.

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